

# AN OBSERVER'S GUIDE *to* WASHINGTON STATE ELECTIONS



# Introduction

We, in the state of Washington, enjoy a unique tradition of promoting citizen involvement in our political system. The role of observers is grounded in our heritage of encouraging citizens to participate in our political process. Their objective observation of the procedures helps ensure the integrity of our elections.

This pamphlet is intended to explain the process of issuing, processing, and counting ballots by Election Divisions throughout the state. Information related to a specific county's procedures may be obtained from the County Auditor's office or Elections Department. This pamphlet is not intended to be a substitute for the statutes governing this process, but rather should be read in conjunction with them.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact your County Auditor or Elections Department, or the Secretary of State's Elections Division. We will be happy to assist you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Reed". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Sam" and last name "Reed" clearly distinguishable.

Sam Reed  
Secretary of State

## The Office of the Secretary of State

### ADDRESS

Office of the  
Secretary of State  
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Olympia, WA 98504

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[www.vote.wa.gov](http://www.vote.wa.gov)

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### PHONE

1 (800) 448-4881

## County Contact Information

Phone numbers and office  
locations for all 39 counties are  
located on the Secretary of State's  
website at [www.vote.wa.gov](http://www.vote.wa.gov).



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Elections Calendar.

Specific election dates are located at [vote.wa.gov](http://vote.wa.gov).

Click on calendar events to access applicable rules and statutes.

# Election Information

## Election Dates

Detailed information about specific election-related dates is available on the online elections calendar at [www.vote.wa.gov](http://www.vote.wa.gov).

## Primary

The Washington State Primary is held the third Tuesday in August. The purpose of a primary is to narrow the number of candidates running for each office to two candidates. The Top Two Primary permits voters to choose one candidate from all the possible choices within each race. Voters do not declare a party affiliation to vote in the Primary. Candidates are not required to state a party preference.

The two candidates receiving the most votes in the Primary will qualify for the General Election. Candidates must also receive at least 1 percent of the votes cast in the race to advance to the General Election. Other rules apply to judicial races, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and Precinct Committee Officers.

## Presidential Primary

A presidential primary may be held during a presidential election year on the fourth Tuesday in May, or, on an alternate date proposed by the Office of the Secretary of State. Voters have the opportunity to demonstrate to the political party chairs which candidate they would like to see their party endorse for the presidential election.

## General Election

The General Election is held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Candidates receiving the most votes in the General Election are elected to office.

## Special Elections

State law permits additional dates on which special elections may be held:

- The first Tuesday after the first Monday in February
- The fourth Tuesday in April
- The third Tuesday in May (restrictions apply)

The Legislature may set additional special election dates by statute.

# Political Party Observers

Anyone has the right to observe any part of the election process. Observers may watch all aspects of the election including opening of ballots, counting ballots, and the securing of ballots.

## Major Political Party.

A political party is designated as a major party if one of its nominees received more than 5 percent of the total votes cast for President.

Major political parties have a responsibility to provide official party observers to monitor the election process. Prior to an election, County Auditors or County Election Departments contact the major political parties to inform them of when processes are scheduled and how many observers are needed to observe those processes.

## What should I do if I am appointed as a Political Party Observer?

Contact your County Auditor or Elections Department to be put on the list of official observers. The department will provide required training specific to the county's processes and equipment. The department will also inform you or your party contact when and where to observe each procedure.

## Are Political Party Observers needed only in the Primary and General Election?

No. All elections need observers before, during, and after Election Day.

## What election processes may I observe?

You are encouraged to observe:

- Logic and accuracy tests prior to Election Day, including the testing of any precinct ballot counters
- Signature comparison, opening and inspection of mail ballots
- Election Day procedures
- Ballot duplication or resolution/adjudication
- Counting of ballots
- Storing and securing of ballots
- Processing of provisional ballots
- Canvassing board meetings
- Reconciliation of ballots and ballot totals
- Certification of the election
- Any other times when ballots are processed by the County Auditor's Office

## Logic and Accuracy.

An official test to verify the voting system accurately counts each style of ballot and produces cumulative totals.

## Canvassing Board.

Consisting of the County Auditor, County Prosecuting Attorney and the Chairman of the County Legislative Authority. It is the Canvassing Board's duty to certify the election results.

Counties may vary in election procedures, provided that the procedures comply with current statute. Vote tabulation systems, physical layouts of elections offices, and



Ballot Counter.

A machine that tabulates votes in a readable format. Also known as a vote tallying system or ballot tabulator.

whether voting is completely by mail are variables that require different procedures. For example, ballots may be counted at a central counting center, or, counted at a poll site. For all of these reasons, it is essential to obtain information and training specific to the county.

### **Where can I be trained to be a Political Party Observer?**

The County Auditor or Elections Department provides required training for observers. No one may serve as an official party observer who has not first attended training. The Office of the Secretary of State may also conduct training, but attendance is not required.

### **What will I see in a county that votes entirely by mail?**

Counties conducting elections by mail also have at least one remote ballot deposit location. "Drop off" ballots are collected from the ballot deposit site(s) by the Elections Department during each elections cycle.

Ballots may be opened and prepared for counting before Election Day. Initial processing occurs repeatedly prior to Election Day. However, no votes are counted prior to 7:00 a.m. on Election Day and the results of the vote tally will not be issued before 8:00 p.m.

Political party observers are needed whenever envelopes are delivered, opened, processed, counted, and stored. These processes continue for a period of time after Election Day.

### **What should I observe in a county with polls?**

Currently, only Pierce County opens poll sites on Election Day. Poll site voting opens at 7 a.m. and closes at 8 p.m. There are a variety of procedures to observe depending upon whether the county chooses to use precinct counters for an election, or transport voted ballots to a central counting center.

Ballot counters at the poll site will print out the results for each precinct. The results are saved electronically. The results and other supplies are delivered to the counting center.

If ballots are not tabulated at the polls, ballots are transported in sealed containers to the central counting location.

Following the close of polls, official observers should observe closing procedures and transportation of ballots and materials to the county.

### Ballot Duplication.

The process of making an exact copy of a ballot to guarantee it will be counted correctly by the ballot counting system.



### What should I observe at a counting center?

Ballots are checked in, inspected, duplicated when necessary, and then counted. Mail ballots may also be processed throughout the day.

In a county voting entirely by mail, political party observers may request a random check as described by RCW 29A.60.170. The check compares a manual count to the machine count for one race in no more than six ballot batches or three precincts.

In a county where balloting is also conducted in person at poll sites, official political party observers may request that one race be counted by hand in up to three precincts. The results of the manual count will be compared to the mechanical tabulation results. The major political parties must agree on the precincts and race to be verified. The County Auditor or Elections Department must be notified within 30 minutes of the closing of the polls.

Political party observers are encouraged to observe all aspects of ballot processing and security at counting centers.

### Are observers needed after Election Day?

There are many activities to observe in the days following Election Day. Official political party observers are encouraged to continue watching all initial and final processing of ballots and attend meetings of the County Canvassing Board.

Processing of ballots will continue, although at a greatly reduced pace, until the election is certified.

### What about recounts?

If a race needs to be recounted, the County Auditor will request that official political party observers be present to witness the process.

### How close may I be to the ballots?

Never touch ballots or interfere with workers processing the ballots. You may be only as close as necessary to observe the process. Please remember that observers are not participants in the administration of election procedures.

### What if I have questions or concerns?

Speak with your County Auditor (in King County, the Elections Director) or the person assigned to answer your questions.

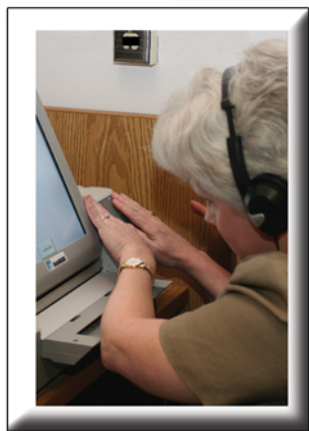


Accessible Voting Unit (AVU).

A touch screen or other device that allows disabled voters to vote without assistance.

Secure Storage.

Secure storage employs the use of numbered seals and logs or any other security measures that will detect inappropriate access to secured materials.



## Mail Ballots

### Ballot Availability

Thirty-eight of Washington's 39 counties vote entirely by mail. Accessible voting units and ballots are available at the County Auditor's Office or Elections Department 20 days before an election through 8 p.m. on Election Day. Ballots must be mailed to voters 18 days before an election. Overseas and service voter ballots are sent 30 days prior or earlier.

### Securing the Ballots

All voted ballots are kept in secure storage when not being processed. Secure storage must enable detection of unauthorized access and may include the use of numbered seals and seal logs, or a mechanism to document entry. Secure storage, when used in regard to balloting, does not necessarily require a locking mechanism.

### Ballot Processing

#### The Outer Envelope

County Auditors may begin processing envelopes containing voted ballots as soon as they are received. The County Canvassing Board, or a designated staff member of the Elections Department, will verify the voter's signature on the outer envelope to the signature on the voter's registration record. The postmark on the outer envelope is also verified. With the exception of overseas and service voters, the envelope must either be postmarked no later than the day of the election or deposited in the County Auditor's Office, a polling location, or a designated deposit site not later than 8 p.m. on Election Day. The date of signature on the oath on the outer envelope is considered the date of mailing for overseas and service voters.

If the signature on the outer envelope matches the signature on the voter's registration and has a valid postmark, the envelope moves to the next step in the process. If the signature on the envelope is missing or does not match the signature on the registration record, the voter is notified.

#### The Security Envelope

After signatures are verified, ballots are removed from envelopes in two distinct steps. First, outer envelopes are opened and all inner security envelopes are removed and placed aside in a tray or batch. All empty outer envelopes are then secured away from the work area prior to the next step. Second, security envelopes containing ballots are opened and all ballots are removed. This two-step process prevents the identity of a voter being connected to a ballot. Election staff will verify that no



## GLOSSARY

### Ballot Inspection.

Each ballot must be inspected for marks or damage that would prevent the votes from being counted accurately.

### Target Area.

The oval, square, or arrow corresponding to a candidate, write-in line, or choice on the ballot where the voter is instructed to mark his or her vote. Tabulation systems read target areas..

### Ballot Resolution (Adjudication).

In a county using a digital scanning system, the ballot resolution (adjudication) process is conducted in addition to ballot duplication procedures. Resolving a digitally scanned copy of a ballot permits a vote to be counted as the voter intended.

### Tabulate.

To total votes in a readable form.

### Tally.

The counting of votes. Tally of votes does not produce a readable results report.

### Canvass.

Final determination of questionable ballots by the County Canvassing Board.

ballots remain in the envelopes by looking through the small viewing holes punched through both the outer and security envelopes.

## Ballot Inspection

Ballots must be inspected prior to tabulation. The inspection process consists of thoroughly examining each face of every voted ballot and each target area. Election workers look for physically damaged ballots, ballots that are unreadable and might not be correctly counted by the machine, marks that are different from those specified in the voting instructions, stray marks, tears or creases in the ballot, and write-in votes. Such ballots may be duplicated or referred to the County Canvassing Board for determination.

## Ballot Duplication

Ballots that are damaged or not readable by the tabulator must be duplicated when the intent of the voter's mark is clear. A voter's intent is determined by guidelines provided by the Secretary of State in "Statewide Standards of What is a Vote." The guide is available at [www.vote.wa.gov/elections](http://www.vote.wa.gov/elections).

Ballots are duplicated, resolved, or adjudicated by teams of two employees from the County Auditor's Office or Elections Department. A unique control number is assigned to each duplicated ballot. This number is recorded on both the original and duplicate ballots. A duplication log records the unique control number, the initials of the two people who conducted the duplication, and the total number of ballots duplicated. Original ballots and duplicate ballots are secured when not in process.

## Ballot Tabulation

The tallying of ballots may begin at 7 a.m. on Election Day. The results of the tally of votes processed during the day shall not be produced until after 8 p.m. on Election Day.

After Election Day, counties process and canvass ballots every three days when in possession of more than 500 ballots and every single day, excluding Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays, when the population of the county exceeds 75,000 people.

## Voting Centers and Polling Places

Every county provides at least one voting center or polling place. Voting centers located at the County Auditor's Office or Elections Department must be open for early voting during regular business hours starting 20 days prior to Election Day. Polling places are open only on Election Day. Pierce County is the only county that opens polling places on Election Day.

### Voting in Person

#### In Person Voting.

Any method of voting where the voter appears in person before the elections officials. In person voting may consist of casting a ballot on an assisted voting unit, an electronic voting unit, or an official or provisional ballot deposited directly into a ballot box.

On Election Day, voting centers and polling places open at 7 a.m. and close at precisely 8 p.m. Voters already in line to vote prior to 8 p.m. will be given a ballot. The public and observers may remain at the voting center or polling place to witness the security of the closing procedures.

State law requires any person voting in person to provide identification to the election workers before being issued a ballot or given access to an accessibility voting unit. If a voter does not have identification, the voter is offered a provisional ballot.

#### Provisional Ballots.

Issued whenever there is a question regarding a voter's eligibility to vote. Validity of provisional ballots is determined by research into a voter's registration

Provisional ballots are issued to voters who may not be qualified to vote a regular ballot. For example, a voter with a record showing that a mail ballot has already been received by the county, or, a voter whose name does not appear in the voter registration/precinct pollbook will be issued a provisional ballot. Provisional voters will be given written information on how to learn if the ballot was eventually counted or not.

The following acts are not allowed near official voting sites:

- Campaigning
- Collecting petition signatures
- Impeding the voting process

### Observing at Voting Centers

When a voter wishes to cast a ballot by any other means than a mail ballot, the voter's record is checked to verify that a ballot was not already received by the county. Only after the voter's record is checked, and the eligibility of the voter is verified, will an official or provisional ballot be issued.

Voters will be asked to sign an affidavit. Affidavits are managed so that no link exists between the voter and the ballot. Immediately after voting in person, the voter's record is flagged as having cast a ballot in the election. This precludes the

Direct Recording Equipment (DRE). Also known as an AVU.

A type of accessible voting unit that records votes electronically. All DREs produce paper records. No paper record may be used to identify the voter.

Counting Center.

The location in a county where ballots are processed and counted. In the case of counties that have ballot counters at the poll site, it is where the results from the poll site and absentee votes are combined into one set of election results.

possibility of double voting by a voter.

### Observing at Poll Sites

At the polls, an observer may look at the poll book or at the inspector's copy as long as voters are not waiting to vote. Reviewing the poll book may not interrupt the voting process.

After voting closes, the election workers account for voted ballots. Election workers must unseal and open the ballot box to count the ballots. Electronic voting unit ballot records are prepared for delivery to the counting center. The signatures are also counted in the poll book.

In counties where ballots are counted at the polling place, the precinct election officers also print out the results of the poll site ballot counter.

All information is written on a ballot accountability form. The election workers must verify that all ballots are secured. All ballots and electronic record of voting, the completed accountability form, and poll supplies are then transported to the county's counting center by two people, one representative each from the Democratic Party and Republican Party. Observers may follow the transport vehicle, but please notify the election workers prior to doing so.



**Secure Storage.**

Secure storage employs the use of numbered seals and logs or any other security measures which will detect inappropriate access to secured materials.

## Post-Election Activities

After ballots are tabulated, they are put in secure storage. The ballots cannot be accessed again unless there is a problem that needs to be resolved before the election is certified, the ballots are to be recounted, or a court order mandates reopening the container.

After Election Day, the election staff continues to process mail and provisional ballots. Ballots in envelopes with unmatched signatures, missing signatures, or ballots where the voter's intent is not clear are presented to the County Canvassing Board.

As soon as possible after Election Day, election staff will compare the number of ballots tabulated to the ballots logged as ready to count. In a county with polls, the number of signatures in the poll book will be compared to ballots tabulated. If there is a discrepancy in these numbers, election workers investigate and resolve the discrepancy. A record of the process and results of the investigation are presented to the County Canvassing Board.

If there are discrepancies with the results and/or the reconciliation report, the County Canvassing Board may re-canvass the ballots. The re-canvass must be completed on or before the last day to certify the election.

A voter is credited with voting if the voter's ballot was processed for tabulation.

### Election Certification

The official final results of an election are the total of all valid votes cast at the polls, by mail, on accessible voting units (AVUs), or direct recording equipment (DRE). Counties must certify the General Election 21 days after Election Day. All other elections are certified 15 days after Election Day.

An election is certified during a public meeting of the County Canvassing Board. At that time, the chair of the County Commission or County Council administers an oath to the County Auditor (in King County, the Elections Director) attesting to the accuracy of the results. The County Auditor presents a final copy of the results, the oath, and a reconciliation report to the Canvassing Board.

A reconciliation report demonstrates that the number of ballots received equals the sum of ballots counted plus ballots rejected. If the numbers do not match, then the report shall include the detailed steps taken to balance the numbers. The following information must be included in the reconciliation report:

## GLOSSARY

### UOCAVA.

Acronym for the Federal Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act.

### Recount.

The process of retabulating the votes for a specific office or issue on all valid ballots cast in a primary or election.

- Number of registered voters;
- Ballots counted;
- Provisional ballots issued, counted and rejected;
- Absentee ballots issued, counted and rejected;
- Federal write-in ballots counted, and
- UOCAVA ballots issued, counted and rejected.

If the County Canvassing Board is satisfied with the results, the board signs the certification. A copy of Primary and General Election certification is sent to the Office of the Secretary of State.

## Recounts

A recount is conducted to verify the number of votes counted for a particular office or measure. No other office or measure may be examined. The recount may be mandatory or requested. Official political party observers are requested to observe all parts of the recount.

Questions of voter registration, voter qualification, and voter intent on ballots previously considered will not be reconsidered during a recount of the original ballots.

If a race or measure covers only a portion of a county, ballots may need to be pre-sorted. This process occurs prior to beginning the actual recount. Contact your County Auditor to observe this preliminary process.

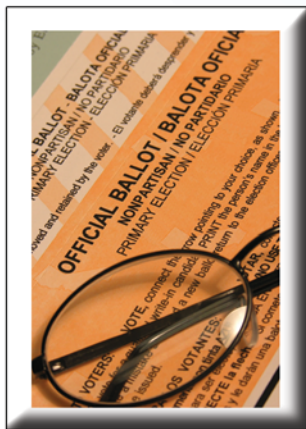
## Mandatory Recounts

A mandatory recount must be conducted when the difference in results between two candidates, or the two choices in a statewide initiative or referendum, is within the margin set by state law.

For statewide offices and statewide measures, when the difference is less than 2,000 votes and less than one half of 1 percent, then the race will be recounted using vote tallying systems. When the difference is less than 1,000 votes and less than one fourth of 1 percent, the race will be recounted by hand.

For all other offices, when the difference is less than 2,000 votes and less than one half of one percent, the race will be recounted using vote tallying systems. When the difference is less than 150 votes and less than one fourth of one percent, the race will be counted by hand.

Measures, other than statewide initiatives and referenda, do not qualify for mandatory recounts. However, recounts may be requested for local measures.



Overvote.

More than the allowable number of votes cast for any one race or measure by a voter on a ballot.

The County Canvassing Board determines when a recount is to be held. When the office is statewide or is in a judicial, congressional, or legislative district that crosses county lines, the Secretary of State determines when the recount is to be certified.

Before, during, and after the recount, security of the ballots is maintained. The ballots are stored in sealed containers whenever not in the process of being recounted.

### Machine Recounts

A machine recount requires running the ballots through the ballot counter a second time. In the case of a digital scan system, the ballot images are reloaded into the ballot tabulation software as they were originally canvassed. In the case of Direct Recording Equipment (DRE) voting devices, the results of the DRE must be re-loaded into the vote tallying system.

All voting systems will require the re-examination of undervotes in the particular race being recounted. Re-examination of undervotes will detect any valid votes previously not tabulated.

Once all of the results have been recalculated, the County Canvassing Board will certify the results and amend the official abstract of the election with the new totals. If the Secretary of State called for the recount, amended results are reported to the Office of the Secretary of State.

### Manual Recounts

During a manual recount, the votes are counted by teams of at least two people. Counting boards must be comprised of a minimum of one representative from each of the two major political parties, or two election staff persons. Additional staff may be added.

A manual recount is conducted as follows.

- Only the responses for one race or measure will be counted at any time.
- One precinct or batch is delivered to a recount team. The original results are not provided.
- The ballots are sorted into separate stacks for each of the candidates or side of a ballot measure, overvotes, undervotes, and write-in votes.
- Each stack of ballots must be counted at least twice to confirm the number of votes in each stack. The individual tallies are not shared until both persons have counted the ballots.
- Individual tallies for each stack are compared. If the counts match, the results are reported to the designated staff person. The counts are then compared to the original results.

- If the counts do not match, the ballots are recounted by the same counting board one more time. If the counts still do not match, the discrepancy must be reported to the designated staff person and the ballots referred to another counting board.
- Any ballots that have votes not clearly discernable are referred to the County Canvassing Board for determination.
- The County Canvassing Board determines which votes should be counted if ballots are referred by the recount teams. Any valid votes found on these ballots are added to the results. The board may also investigate any discrepancies between the hand recount and the original count.
- When all the ballots have been tallied by the individual recount teams, the results from each team are added together with the valid votes from the County Canvassing Board. This is the new total for the race.
- Once the new total has been verified, the County Canvassing Board certifies the new totals and amends the abstract of votes.

## Requested Recounts

A recount may be requested by an officer of a political party, a candidate of the office, or a group of five or more registered voters. A requested recount is conducted in the same manner as a mandatory recount.

The request for a recount must be submitted in writing to the appropriate filing officer within three business days after the certification of an election. The request must indicate whether the recount will be conducted by the vote tally system or manually conducted as well as specify if all ballots or selected precincts are to be recounted.

A deposit is required at the time of the request equal to 15 cents per ballot for recount by vote tally system or 25 cents per ballot for manual recount. The requester must pay the actual cost of the recount. Each County Canvassing Board will determine the actual cost of the recount. If the recount changes the results of the election, the deposit is refunded.

## Elections Ending in a Tie

If a race is still tied after a mandatory recount, the winner is determined by lot. “By lot” may be the flipping of a coin, drawing of a number, or a similar method. The filing officer will conduct the lot draw according to county procedure.





## Glossary

*Accessible Voting Unit (AVU).* A touch screen or other electronic device which allows disabled voters to vote without assistance.

*Ballot Counter.* A machine that tabulates votes in a readable format. Also known as a vote tallying system or ballot tabulator.

*Ballot Duplication.* The process of making an exact copy of a ballot to ensure it will be read correctly by the ballot counting system.

*Ballot Inspection.* Each ballot must be inspected for mistakes or damage that would prevent the votes to be counted correctly.

*Ballot Resolution.* In a county using a digital scanning system, the ballot resolution (adjudication) process is conducted in addition to ballot duplication. Resolving a digitally scanned copy of a ballot permits a vote to be counted as the voter intended.

*Canvass.* Final determination of questionable ballots by the County Canvassing Board.

*Counting Center.* The location in a county where ballots are processed and counted. In the case of counties that have ballot counters at the poll site, it is where the results from the poll site are combined into one set of election results.

*County Canvassing Board.* Consisting of the County Auditor (in King County it is the Elections Division Director), County Prosecuting Attorney, and the chairman of the County Commissioners or County Council.

*Direct Recording Equipment (DRE).* A type of accessible voting unit that records a vote electronically. All DRE devices produce a paper record.

*Election Workers.* People who help administer elections at each voter center or poll site. Sometimes known as “board workers” or “poll site workers.”

*Logic and Accuracy.* An official test to verify that the ballot counter and programming correctly counts each style of ballot and produces cumulative totals.

*Major Political Party.* A political party is designated as a major party if one of its nominees received more than 5 percent of the total votes cast for President in the last presidential election.

*Official Party Observer.* Official observer appointed by one of the major political parties. An official observer may not be an election worker hired to process ballots and may not serve as a poll watcher at the same time.

*Overvote.* More than the allowable number of votes cast for any one race or measure by a voter on a ballot.

*Provisional Ballots.* A ballot issued when the voter's name is not on the voter list, was sent an absentee or mail ballot, did not have identification at the poll site, or any other reason when a voter can not vote a regular ballot.

*Recount.* The process for retabulating the votes for a specific office or issue on all valid ballots cast in a primary or election.

*Secure Storage.* Employs the use of numbered seals and logs or any other security measures that detect inappropriate access to secured materials.

*Tabulate.* To total votes in a readable format.

*Tally.* The counting of votes. Tally of votes does not produce a readable results report.

*Target Area.* The oval, square, or arrow corresponding to a candidate, write-in line, or choice on the ballot where the voter is instructed to mark. Tabulation systems read target areas.

*Undervote.* A race or measure with no vote cast by the voter on a valid ballot. Also known as a "blank" vote.

*UOCAVA.* The Federal Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act.